INSECTS: THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE BUTTERFLY

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“When landlords turn the drunken bee
Out of the foxglove’s door,
When butterflies renounce their drams,
I shall but drink the more!”

One of the early Chinese philosophers, Chuang Tzu I think, once dreamed he was a butterfly and spent the rest of his life in worry lest he was in fact a butterfly dreaming he was a man. Both Chinese and Westerners smile at this seeming innocent and beguiling fantasy. But if you stop to ponder on it, turning it this way and that, you will find it full of meaning, just as the ephemeral bubbles blown of soap and water, seeming no more than a brief diversion for the very young, in fact inform one of many things without the boredom of a wordy lecture. A gossamer bubble aglow with rainbow colors, floating on the lightest breeze and in an instant exploded—almost nothing, yet it is a completely perfect thing. Fragile and evanescent, it is a sphere like the sun and moon and the planet we live on and as such is a reminder of them.

Lightsome as it is, this philosopher and butterfly tale has in it one at least of the essential differences between the Chinese and the Western mind. The Chinese with tolerant amusement (and no science) accept a scheme in which, although man is superior, he is part and parcel of the natural world and of the universe. The scientific West does not yet do that. We in the West insist on making a sharp division between man and the animal world. We have long interpreted the first chapter of Genesis to mean that this world was created for man, man alone has a soul. It is true that on our planet man both East and West has indeed achieved an ascendency, but the East and West take very different attitudes about it. This feeling of superiority runs in the human blood, yet as far as one can see the Chinese are less arrogant than Westerners—with the Chinese it is all part of one great harmonious scheme. The Chinese man can be friends with a butterfly, not quite on equal terms but with a common understanding. At just what point Western man began to
Adam Why colour? human and of standing or much. is as and the manuscripts. errors and the Church. Vincent friendship and the Bible, Old Testament or New, really support him? After all, when there was trouble in the Garden of Eden it was Adam and Eve who were expelled, not the serpent. The Bible itself shows a great understanding of the natural world and is often friendly towards it. Surely it is man himself, the Western man, who has grown toplofty in these matters. Medieval man was on friendly terms with the natural world. He saw clearly and took great delight in plants and animals and insects. He saw them as reflections, as mirrors of the Christian church, but he was sensitive and sympathetic. Look at the illuminated manuscripts and read the "Four Mirrors" of Vincent of Beauvais.

"Hugh of St. Victor looking at a dove thinks of the Church. 'The dove has two wings even as the Christian has two ways of life, the active and the contemplative. The blue feathers of the wings are thoughts of heaven; the uncertain shades of the body, the changing colours that recall an unquiet sea, symbolise the ocean of human passions in which the Church is sailing. Why are the dove's eyes this beautiful golden colour? Because yellow, the colour of ripe fruit, is the colour too of experience and maturity, and the yellow eyes of the dove are the looks full of wisdom which the Church casts on the future. The dove, moreover, has red feet, for the Church moves through the world with her feet in the blood of the martyrs.'"

One suspects that the humanists of the Renaissance have a good deal to answer for in this and other matters. Certainly Western man's attitude has changed through the centuries. Observe the tremendous fuss Mr. Darwin created in the nineteenth century. That, of course, is very old hat now, but you will still find plenty of indignant people who do not want an ape for even a remote ancestor. I myself do not feel this way about it. My own great-aunt Martha, the terror of three counties, would have done far better as virgin queen of a tribe of chimps than she did in ninety-six years or so of trying to straighten out Fitchburg, Massachusetts. Why must we in the West quarrel with the animal world? It is not at all necessary. We fight, we struggle, we make one exciting new discovery after another, such as that minerals are actually alive and changing, more slowly than plants or humans, to be sure, but still alive. The Chinese took this idea for granted long ago without scientific proof. How easy and how sensible!

If the philosopher and butterfly story can lead to such profundities, we may inquire further and consider the business of dreams. Webster's definition of a dream is "A series of thoughts, images, or emotions occurring during sleep; any seeming of reality or events occurring to one sleeping. Dreams are usually frag-
mentary and distorted representations of the experiences of waking life, though they are at times marked by consecutive reasoning or by a storylike naturalness.

"We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. Shak."

"We are such stuff as dreams are made on"—Contemporary psychologists tell us that the human mind is in one respect like an iceberg. Only a fraction of it is visible to our conscious ego. The rest is submerged. Then which are we, the ninth above the surface or the turmoiling eight ninths below? Surely we are both, and the dream is part of our mental fabric and life scheme. Chuang Tzu might well have been in doubt.

This business of dreams. Thousands of years of dreams. Take the dreams which disturb or enliven us in sleep. Until the twentieth century dreams were often considered as prophecies or illuminations. Then along comes Mr. Freud to tell us that dreams are our own wish fulfillment, and it seems that almost invariably dreams so interpreted are to one’s own discredit. Really that man Freud has spoiled more agreeable dreams for us than anybody I know. And who until the detestable Mr. Freud came along did not in dreams enjoy running up and down stairs or floating happily or swimming in blue and golden seas. And suppose everything he says be true, for spoiling human pleasure nothing like it has been seen since the Spanish Inquisition. Begone, say I, let me run up and down stairs in my dreams. Let me dream I am a butterfly. What possible harm can that do anybody?

However, you need not dream of butterflies—you have only to look at a horizontal scroll of them in the Metropolitan Museum painted by a lady who signs herself proudly Chiang Hsiang Nu Shih Ma Ch’uan. In this she uses both her pen name and formal family name, the Chiang Hsiang Female Scholar—Ma Ch’uan—Ma being her family name and Ch’uan her first name. Ma Ch’uan was born in Ch’ang Shu in Kiangsu Province in the late seventeenth century and lived a good eighty years. She is classed as a bird and flower painter—one of those convenient categories in use both East and West. China has had its feminists in plenty and painters at least are not at all shy about it. Two of them painted the walls of one of the Buddhist cave temples of Tun Huang in the T’ang dynasty and painted kneeling portraits of themselves at the door of the inner chamber. The Chinese take none of the rather patronizing attitude of Western critics in regard to female painters but praise good painting irrespective of the sex of the painter.

Among her paintings this picture is a dream of butterflies come true—a ballet of butterflies, butterflies which appear by ones and twos and then in a whirl, butterflies in iridescent black, butterflies in pale creamy pinks and milky yellows and in whites painted upon white. No pro-
fessional entomologist has been invited to name the species or even the general families because Western naturalists get very irritable when confronted with Chinese painting—Chinese painting looks realistic enough, but when it comes to animals and birds and flowers and insects it never quite conforms to Gray’s *Botany* or Holland’s *Butterflies*. This seems to put most naturalists into a fury. One botanist of my acquaintance took to drink and went quietly mad after a week or two of trying to determine the exact species of clematis intended by the Chinese painters. Not only he but one after another, whether they be zoologists, botanists, ornithologists, entomologists, or even geologists—they are nearly all irritable in this matter. In painting we cannot catalogue Chinese flowers and insects with Linnaean precision, but even in the dullest Chinese painting of flower or insect there is a breath of movement, of the intangible thing called life.

Let us be content when it comes to insects in Chinese painting with their family names. Popular or scientific as you choose, the names of insects are usually attractive in any language. Take Female Scholar Ma Ch’uan’s butterflies, for instance. Some of these airy creatures are related to the Papilionidae—the swallowtails and their relatives, and to the Pierinae—the sulphurs and the whites, although, to be sure, many of these are in pastel pinks and dove blues (moonlight on snow the Chinese would call it) —the kind of liberty a Chinese will take with an insect, a bird, or a human being for that matter. Likewise when it comes to the Hymenoptera it is better not to struggle to pin a specific name to sawflies, ants, bees, and wasps. In the Ch’ien Hsuan picture at least two kinds of dragonfly appear—Odonata both. To the right one is tempted to recognize Anax Junius itself, and the dark-winged dragonfly is surely one of the Libellulidae. Pretty as are the Latin names of these creatures, for practical purposes the English common names will do—stag beetles, katydids, grasshoppers, crickets, walking sticks, and praying mantises, all conspicuous in Chinese paintings of the insect world. Usually they are associated with flowers and plants, as insects should be, but one subject often repeated is a seated cat, quiet and poised but with longing in its eye as it watches a butterfly just out of reach—just barely out of reach.

There are other insects in Chinese painting—painted not for detail as in the West, where indeed insects appear in medieval manuscripts painted with sympathy and understanding, but where in Western painting is an insect painted for itself—as a kind of portrait as dignified as man is?

The Chinese make pets of insects, especially crickets, which they breed for singers or fighters. Do not think it is a matter of catching a cricket and expecting him to sing. The cricket fancier starts with cricket eggs. He hatches them on a corner of his own bed, which is made of brick and gently warmed. When the crickets are
hatched they are carefully raised to maturity. As they mature the fancier listens and selects the most promising singers. He then consults a professional cricket connoisseur. The owner and expert give the crickets an attentive audition and groom a chosen few. A drop of hot wax placed dexterously underneath each wing is believed to smooth and heighten the quality of a cricket’s chirp. No doubt it does so.

Furthermore, diva crickets live in gourds, gourds trained on the vine into various shapes, gourds with finely etched designs and pictures and openwork covers carved in ivory, jade, and fine wood, or worked in metal.

The diva crickets live in gourds, but for public performances they are transferred to small delicately constructed cages. Mr. George D. Pratt divided a collection of cricket cages between three museums, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, both of New York, and the museum at Amherst College.

The singing of American crickets, whether those we hear in the meadow or those we hear in the house, is pleasing to some, displeasing to others. The house cricket is louder (and this is not a mere matter of acoustics), but few Americans would think to differentiate between individual singers in field or on hearth, much less make pets of them. The Chinese do.

When it comes to Chinese crickets a favorite is the tiny insect called the Golden Bell. The Golden Bell is a country cricket and the subject of a legend. It sings in the countryside about the tombs of the Ming emperors and in the courtyards of the temples built in honor of the tombs. The legend is that one of the lesser consorts of the Ming court who could not hope to be buried with her lord found herself failing in health. One does not speak of death to an emperor. The consort sketched a tiny cricket—a portrait, she said, of herself. She died and was entombed alone. The emperor visited her tomb and was aware of a clear and delicate trill, as of a tiny golden bell. He searched and found a little cricket—the cricket of the picture. This cricket is now known as the Golden Bell. In legend it is the consort who could not be buried with her emperor but preferred to become a cricket and sing in the fields about his tomb.

When I first slept on the temple terrace of the tomb of Yung Lo I did not know this legend of the Golden Bells but was aware of the rain of sound. Later when I was living in Peking Lao Sun in August would bring them in a shoe box, a thousand at a time and turn them loose in the garden courtyards. Instantly there was a rain of sound. The Golden Bell trills—a fragile and

*The Queen Bee, attributed to Chao Ch’ang. Sung dynasty (960-1279). Fletcher Fund, 1947*
delicate trill, gold but paper-thin gold. When hundreds of them sing it is a shower of sound—
a shower shaken by the wind.

Alas, the Golden Bell does not live in Peking,
free or confined. Water and tea were provided
for them on leaves and in small saucers. Bits of
lettuce and cucumber were everywhere, but
each night the ghostly golden rain was less and
less until in about a week they were gone.

Children, and grown-ups too, take too much
for granted in this world. Until this minute it
has never occurred to me to inquire how the
Golden Bell crickets got to my courtyard at all.
I cannot tell you whether Golden Bell crickets
were commonly on sale in Peking’s cricket mar-
ket or whether Lao Sun sent a messenger to the
tombs to catch them. The former is most likely
the case, but on the other hand I never heard
them in any other household in Peking, foreign
or Chinese. (Poor Lao Sun, who has spent his
years in devising entertainment for his friends,
own caught by some Communistic vagary, phil-
osophically says it is chilly in prison, he would
like a coat.)

We have no painting of the Golden Bell
cricket. But we have the Lady Scholar’s picture
of butterflies and the bees and wasps in the pic-
ture called The Queen Bee. This painting is
attributed to one Chao Ch’ang of the Sung dy-
nasty. This is also a horizontal scroll. Whoever
painted it had some fantasy in mind. He moves
as a musical composer does. He paints from
right to left. His first theme would seem to be a
very rambling pink rambler rose, his back-
ground for a swarm of bees. He goes on and re-
peats this rambler rose theme, the second time a
yellow rambler rose and the second time pricked
out with a community of wasps. It is subtle in
its intent. We are meant to be dazzled by the
flower painting and then realize that the flowers
are merely a setting for the bees and wasps.

Both these pictures are near perfection as
painting. One interested in authenticity can
feel pretty safe that the butterflies are correctly
dated and painted by the lady herself. The
painter’s name attached to The Queen Bee is
little more than a name. Without a name it is
still what is called a masterpiece. This I believe
is a Sung picture but would not care if it were
painted yesterday—yesterday or in the twelfth
century you cannot match it in known Chinese
painting.

The Detroit Ch’ien Hsuan is another thing.
I believe it is a Ch’ien Hsuan and the only one
I feel sure of. All that is true and more. Not only
is this Ch’ien Hsuan perfection as a painting,
but it is a lovely glimpse of the insect world—
as clear and seeming unconscious as an occa-
sional line of Emily Dickinson. You must forget
science—the juxtaposition of grasshopper,
beetle, and katydid to the dragonfly family is
possible but unlikely. This painter is chiefly
concerned with the water world. Every child knows the water world, but as a man forgets that any pond, any pool is a little world in itself, teeming with life, both visible and hidden. The painter reminds us. We can date the season exactly—late August—a partly eaten lotus leaf and full blown water-edge grasses would tell us this. In Peking the lotus comes into flower in early July; truck farmers harvest it in mid-August; in private pools, unharvested, it begins to wither and fade. And it is in the heat of August when the various dragonflies are at their prime.

Late August this picture, a poetic report of this water world, not of the great seas but of a pond—a pool. A lovely world—a world of dragonflies in flight, but lest we think it a dragon-fly heaven Ch’ien Hsuan gives us a scrambling frog obviously bent on getting himself a dragon-fly sandwich for tea.

For the general and for me, now, the content of a picture, a Chinese picture at least, often seems to give more pleasure than it is worth as a prized object of art. That is pure blasphemy and comes the more horrendous from a curator. I stand upon it. The presentment of a swirl of butterflies will attract the attention of the veriest lout as quickly as it will the erudite (and more likely to be noticed by the former). To either it gives pleasure. The swirl of butterflies translated to a picture—are you yourself so full of vanity, so high-stomached that you think that this is a thing reserved to you? Somebody should tell you things and take you down a piece. Butterflies are pretty things, the sight of them gives pleasure to the stupidest prime minister and to the most brilliant clown. For each it is the same thing when you translate the butterfly to canvas or paper.

When the presentment becomes a work of art then all kinds of new things come into the discussion. There the anxious collector or curator must be concerned to acquire the butterfly painting that is the best, he must have it pedigreed and authentic. Collector or curator (the latter a public trust) does regard these things. It is blasphemy to say they are of no account. They are of account, and collectors and curators do with all their errors and mistakes a public service. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. A fine thing and to the public pride, but do not forget that in the humblest sketch that lovely creature the butterfly is there.

The attraction of butterflies for man is obvious, but insects which live in communities are also interesting to him, especially the bee and the ant. The bees, of course, established their communal life long before man arrived upon the scene at all and are likely to continue the same system for a long time to come. The bee does not change, but the attitude of human beings, particularly philosophers and sociologists, does. Victorian children were taught to admire
the busy bee who, laying up a golden store of honey, acted as proxy bridegroom to the flowers, and constantly intoned a hymn of praise and thanks to its creator. In our century the bee and the ant were for a time pointed out as admirable examples of socialistic living. These days let any innocent senator praise the bee and he is immediately attacked as a dangerous Fascist. The bee naturally does not know this and persists in preserving its monarchical way of life with a dynasty that has lasted for countless millenniums and is not likely to be overthrown by any Marxian or Hitlerian bee.

Entomologists, of course, point out that on our planet it is a desperate race between man and insect as to which will ultimately inherit the earth. Already insects have developed a physical structure far more impervious to germs than that of man. They have learned to use as food every organic form of life and even certain stones. The entomologists do not joke. Farmers are more aware of this than city people.

You will have a glimmer of this yourself if you ever chance to meet a swarm of locusts—loathsome things. When first hatched they are tiny things. They grow rapidly and crawl day by day, fanning out across the countryside, devouring every blade of grass, every leaf. They grow, they crawl, they try their adolescent wings. They look like a seething flood of black lava, and from them rises a multitudinous, menacing sound. At last, their wings full grown, they rise in a monstrous cloud and move to terrify new peoples and destroy new fields.

Man battling his insect enemies has discovered DDT—death to the insect world. This is a weapon to be used with caution lest in his triumphant war upon insect enemies he also kill off his insect friends and so deny the birds their food, flowers their marriage proxies, and eventually produce a desert waste which he himself cannot live upon.

The Chinese, unawakened to this danger, regard insects with tolerance and calm and did so long before Buddhism and the theory of the soul returning and returning in different form until it attained perfection became part of their thinking. With Buddhism came Ti Tsang, one of whose manifestations was as the Compassionate Lord of the Underworld. In Japan Ti Tsang became the gentle Jizo, who carries a staff with musically jingling rings to warn the insects of his coming lest he inadvertently step on one. A good Buddhist, bitten, will say nothing but smile upon the mosquito or the flea that bites him (even the pre-Buddhist paragon of filial piety, Wu Meng, slept naked by his parents’ bed to distract mosquitoes from them). A Buddhist not quite so good, not quite so far upon the Way, may give the flea a cruel nip or slap the mosquito to extinction. But when he does so his conscience is like to trouble him; to take life is
an error. To kill a mosquito suddenly and without thought is bad enough, but often your Buddhist deliberates; he may stop and consider the consequences—will I slap or will I not slap? This may mean another forty thousand years in hell, but this mosquito, she disturbs me now, and after all with the infinite years ahead forty thousand years does not matter much. Indeed this mosquito on the same road that I am may very well be glad to get out of being a mosquito and perhaps reappear again as something pleasanter, a butterfly perhaps. Absurd? Not at all if you are a Buddhist or a Chinese.

A Western entomologist does not go so far as this, but he is on intimate terms with insects too and seeks to inform and interest the public in the insect world. He does so by articles in nature magazines, by occasional moving pictures, by photographic enlargements in which the house fly or the grasshopper magnified too many times becomes a monster so unbelievable that we give it a fascinated glance and go on to pictures of man-created mechanisms. Brilliant and colossal as are the various devices in a steel works, a paper works, a textile factory, man can look at them complacently—sensible and usual and indeed man-made—things of pride. Faced with a grasshopper as large as a steam roller we look upon it as an oddity, fascinating for a brief moment, something for a fancy dress ball or a festive holiday parade, or for the frightening fantasies of the Sunday comics. In vain do entomologists point out the extraordinary mechanical powers of insects, in vain point out the relative drawing power of the horse and the ant. Only the makers of airplanes seem to have a glimmer of the perfect mechanisms of the bird and insect world. They watch the movement of wings. They talk more of birds and properly envy them. They must watch insects also and either keep it a top secret or think it bad publicity. Their vanity is to be thought air or birdmen. It is true once in a while one may for a moment mistake a distant dot of plane for a gull or hawk. Only for an instant, until the eye informs one that the distant speck is not a live thing—beautiful but not alive. Much less do airplanes as they soar off the field at La Guardia resemble birds than they resemble insects, much more do airplane wings resemble the wings of insects than they do the wings of birds. More like dragonfly than hawk are those great planes as they roar across the sky above us.

Your passionate entomologist learns in dealing with his human associates to keep his love of insects a very secret thing. Even the Greeks, whose fantasies of faun and satyr, of centaur and minotaur, might well seem a little extravagant if not unnatural to modern man, paid very little attention to insects. There was, of course, the contest between Athena and Arachne over weaving. Arachne was punished and became a
spider, and in the long run, wít you and tremble, Arachne has come off rather better. Who evokes Athena now? But the silken skein of one of the Arachnidae, crudely called the black widow spider, was much sought after in the second World War for use in most delicate instruments.

In this I fall into the very error that I have pointed out that entomologists fall into. They know the wonders of the insect world—they try to entertain, to cajole their seeming stupid compatriots.

It is a difficult road. Your average human being, except for butterflies and the larger night moths, which are pretty, considers insects as bugs, pests. He is right and can come up with a list of hateful insects, mosquitoes, gnats, spiders, house flies, roaches, death-dealing lice, and the unmentionable bed bug. Surely it is too much to ask him to consider such unpleasant creatures objectively, too much to ask him to observe the ballerina poise of the female mosquito that stings him. Too much to ask him to put sugar on the shelf for cockroaches as one puts out a salt lick for deer. Light and lovely on their legs, with delicate antennae like pheasant feathers on the headdresses of Chinese dancers, these roaches rush across your pantry shelf. So does your entomologist see them, and so you think him slightly or something more than slightly nuts. He is not. He is fortunate—for there is hardly any place in the world, or any season or any time of day, where he may not find interest and entertainment. The rest of us would do well to emulate him as much as practical, to recognize the evil-looking robber fly and sinister ichneumons as insect friends—friends because they destroy insects noxious and uncomfortable to us.

We will do well to consider spiders too which, of course, are not properly insects at all but cousins to them in the sub-kingdom of the Arthropoda—Kingdom of the Jointed Feet. Spiders are our friends (even the few that are really poisonous will not bite unless disturbed). Their webs are wonderful and various, exciting to watch in the weaving, beautiful when complete.

No Chinese ever had such thoughts. Insects, as far as one can judge in painting or literature, they took quite calmly and at face value. They would seem, as far as pictures tell us, to have noticed them and painted them for pleasure. They did it well, so well that Westerners will look and accept with instant pleasure a praying mantis or a stag beetle in Chinese painting without thinking of them as nasty bugs at all.

The quotation on page 172 is from The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Little, Brown and Company, 1944. The passage from Hugh of St. Victor (De bestiis et aliis rebus, bk. 1) is quoted from Émile Mâle, Religious Art in France in the xiii Century, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1913.